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ABSTRACT

Students exhibiting failure syndrome approach assignments with low expectations of success and tend to give up at early signs of difficulty. This Digest delineates the nature of failure syndrome, suggests strategies for coping with failure syndrome students, and discusses how teachers can help. Some students, especially in the early grades, show failure syndrome tendencies as part of larger patterns of emotional immaturity. Most symptoms of failure syndrome, however, develop through social learning mechanisms centered around experiences with failure. Failure syndrome students need assistance in regaining self-confidence in their academic abilities and in developing strategies for coping with failure and persisting with problem-solving efforts when they experience difficulties. Many teachers use cognitive retraining strategies with these students such as attribution training, efficacy training, and strategy training. Research has found that other strategies teachers employ to help failure syndrome students include: encouragement and shaping strategies in responding to students, engaging in supportive behaviors, providing reassurance, and making personal appeals to the student to improve performance. More effective teachers appeared to place greater emphasis on insisting on better effort and seemed to have greater confidence that the improvements the student could achieve would be stable over time. Researchers have argued that students who developed an "entity" view of ability (seeing ability as fixed and limited) can benefit from direct training designed to shift them to an "incremental" view (seeing ability as something that can be developed through practice). Teacher behaviors that encourage incremental views of ability include: acting more as resource persons than as judges, focusing students more on learning processes than on outcomes, reacting to errors as natural and useful parts of the learning process rather than as evidence of failure, stressing effort over ability and personal standards over normative standards when giving feedback, and attempting to stimulate achievement efforts through intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivational strategies. (LPP)

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Failure Syndrome Students

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"Failure syndrome" is one of several terms that teachers commonly use (others include "low self-concept," "defeated," and "frustrated") to describe students who approach assignments with very low expectations of success and who tend to give up at early signs of difficulty. Psychologists have described this phenomenon as "learned helplessness," a slightly more technical definition but referring to a similar pattern of behavior. Unlike students of limited ability, who often fail despite their best efforts, failure syndrome students often fail needlessly because they do not invest their best efforts—they begin tasks half-heartedly and simply give up when they encounter difficulty. This Digest delineates the nature of the problem, suggests strategies for coping with failure syndrome students, and discusses how teachers can help.

Who Are Failure Syndrome Students?

Some students, especially in the early grades, show failure syndrome tendencies as part of larger patterns of emotional immaturity (for example, low frustration tolerance or avoidance, inhibition, or adult dependency as reactions to stress). They may focus more on dependency-related desires for attention from the teacher than on trying to learn what an academic activity is designed to teach. This pattern may be a defense mechanism exhibited by some children who feel unable to compete with successful siblings, who lack confidence in their own abilities, or who have acquired failure expectations from their parents or teachers. Parents or teachers may communicate low expectations through a variety of direct and indirect means, especially to students who have been assigned labels such as "learning impaired."

Most failure syndrome symptoms, however, develop through social learning mechanisms centered around experiences with failure. Most children begin school with enthusiasm, but over time many find the experience anxiety-provoking and psychologically threatening. Many children find it difficult to have their performance monitored in classrooms where failure carries the danger of public humiliation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that some students, especially those who have experienced a continuing history of failure or a recent cycle of failure, begin to believe that they lack the ability to succeed. Eventually such students abandon serious attempts to master tasks and begin to concentrate instead on preserving their self-esteem in their own eyes and their reputations in the eyes of others (Ames, 1987; Rohrkemper & Como, 1988).

What Strategies Help Failure Syndrome Students?

Failure syndrome students need assistance in regaining self-confidence in their academic abilities and in developing strategies for coping with failure and persisting with problem-solving efforts when they experience difficulties. Many specific suggestions have emerged from research on particular theoretical concepts or treatment approaches. Many of these involve what Ames (1987) has called "cognition retraining." Three of the more prominent approaches to cognition retraining are attribution retraining, efficacy training, and strategy training.

Attribution Retraining. This strategy involves bringing about changes in students' tendencies to attribute failure to lack of ability rather than to a remediable cause, such as insufficient effort or use of an inappropriate strategy. Typically, attribution retraining involves exposing students to a planned series of experiences, couched within an achievement context, in which modeling, socialization, practice, and feedback are used to teach them to (1) concentrate on the task at hand rather than worry about failing, (2) cope with failures by retracing their steps to find their mistake or by analyzing the problem to find another approach, and (3) attribute their failures to insufficient effort, lack of information, or use of ineffective strategies rather than to lack of ability.

Efficacy Training. These programs also involve exposing students to a planned set of experiences within an achievement context and providing them with modeling, instruction, and feedback. However, while attribution retraining programs were developed specifically for learned helplessness students and thus focus on teaching constructive response to failure, efficacy training programs were developed primarily for low achievers who have become accustomed to failure and have developed generalized low self-concepts of ability. Consequently, efficacy training helps students set realistic goals and pursue them with the recognition that they have the ability needed to reach those goals if they apply reasonable effort.

Strategy Training. In this approach, modeling and instruction are used to teach problem-solving strategies and related self-talk that students need to handle tasks successfully. Strategy training is a component of good cognitive skills instruction to all students; it is not primarily a remedial technique. However, it is especially important for use with frustrated students who have not developed effective learning and problem-solving strategies on their own, but who can learn them through modeling and explicit instruction.

Ames (1987) noted that these cognitive retraining approaches do not take into account the social aspects of the classroom and the reward structures in effect there. Citing findings that an emphasis on competition and social comparison will increase performance anxiety, Ames

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recommended emphasizing private rather than public feedback, phrasing such feedback in terms of progress beyond the individual's own previous levels rather than comparisons with classmates, and avoiding such practices as publicly grading on a curve or posting students' achievement scores.

How Can Teachers Help?

Brophy (1995) found that teachers were unusually confident about their ability to intervene successfully with failure syndrome students. They tended to mention similar response strategies regardless of grade level, location, or effectiveness ratings. A few spoke of providing support and encouragement to such students without making any demands on them; others spoke of making demands without providing special support or assistance; but most suggested a combination of support, encouragement, and task assistance to shape gradual improvement in work habits.

These teachers would make it clear to failure syndrome students that they were expected to work conscientiously and persistently so as to turn in work done completely and correctly, but they would also provide help if needed, reassure them that they would not be given work that they could not do, monitor their progress and provide any needed assistance, and reinforce them by praising their successes, calling attention to their progress, and providing them with opportunities to display their accomplishments publicly. This special treatment would be faded gradually as the students gained confidence and began to work more persistently and independently. These strategies are in line with what is known about cognitive retraining.

Brophy (1998) found that highly effective teachers and other teachers generally implemented similar strategies to help failure syndrome students—such as including encouragement and shaping strategies in their responses to the student, engaging in supportive behaviors, providing reassurance, and making personal appeals to the student to improve performance. But the higher-rated, more-effective teachers appeared to place greater emphasis on insisting on better effort and seemed to have greater confidence that the improvements the student could achieve would be stable over time rather than merely temporary. They tended to assume that the demands made on students were appropriate (and therefore that failure syndrome problems stemmed from the students' mistakenly pessimistic attributions and self-efficacy perceptions), while lower-rated teachers were more likely to fear that their task demands were too difficult for the student to handle.

Dweck and Elliott (1983) argued that students who have developed an *entity* view of ability (e.g, who see it as fixed and limited) stand to benefit from direct training designed to shift them to an *incremental* view (e.g., seeing ability as something that can be developed through practice).

Teacher behaviors that encourage incremental rather than entity views of ability include:

- acting more as resource persons than as judges,
- focusing students more on learning processes than on outcomes,
- reacting to errors as natural and useful parts of the learning process rather than as evidence of failure,
- stressing effort over ability and personal standards over normative standards when giving feedback, and
- attempting to stimulate achievement efforts through primarily intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivational strategies.

Conclusion

In summary, failure syndrome students approach assignments with very low expectations of success and tend to give up at early signs of difficulty. Many teachers use strategies with these students that are in line with what we know about cognitive retraining strategies such as attribution training, efficacy training, and strategy training. Teachers' effectiveness can be enhanced, however, if they use modeling to teach coping strategies, especially techniques for persisting in the face of frustration or failure.

This Digest was adapted from: Brophy, Jere. (1996). *Teaching problem students.* New York: Guilford. Adapted with permission of the author.

For More Information

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